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The story opens in the 1960s, the early 1960s, after the country restocked from the bad drouth of the previous decade. One thing for sure, every outfit worked full force that spring. On top of flood water washing down every erect fencepost in the flats, a screwworm epidemic raged across all of the shortgrass country.

Old hands who thought of roping as an arena sport found themselves racing down brushy canyons, casting manila or nylon loops in fast-fading openings on short pieces of smooth ground. The theme of those long ago days was, "a catch is a catch," meaning if you caught a lamb or a calf by a foot, forget the glory and cherish the conquest.

On one of those early mornings, the light came on in the empty bunkhouse before the horses were fed. When I passed by going to the barn, a cowboy named Chief walked out on the front porch. He said, "Monte, me and Ivan got through down at Live Oak ahead of time. We are going to help you until the work starts." He coughed a dry smoker's hack. "We had a little string of bad luck down at the beer joint between Ozona and Sonora. Our stay outlasted our paychecks."

The "little string of bad luck" took two days to heal. On the third morning, we rode along smoking, riding full face into a dawn breaking into an orange and purple horizon. The time had come as it always does for the day man to tell all the gossip from other ranches, however, this time the story was worthwhile. (I better explain that Chief had to be

the spokesman as Ivan had taken a bad fall that spring and was too sore to do much talking.)

Chief rode up between us. He said, "We weren't fired down at Live Oak. We left because of a life-threatening incident. Come into dinner one day, and the cook started shooting at us with a 30-30 rifle before we reached the big draw in front of the headquarters. Too drunk to take a fine bead, or he could of killed all of us at that range. Kept us hiding down on the draw until he shot all the cartridges in the house."

Chief allowed the drama to set in. Rolled a cigarette and took a deep drag, collapsing the paper the way he always smoked. The story continued once he had the cigarette burning: "Me and Ivan rode up to the house first, us being the oldest. I shore hated to go inside, but once we did, we found the cook sprawled on the kitchen floor still as a dried cow hide. He was lying on and among a bunch of spent 30-30 cartridges. We were so hungry, we stepped around the body on the floor while we warmed up the half-cooked bread and overcooked beans. The youngest kid, Little Joe, said he'd like to scalp the cook to sell the pelt at the Ozona wool house. Me and Ivan had to remind him we were in charge." (Chief or Ivan never mentioned a boss. Judging from the behavior of the indisposed cook, the boss was gone.)

Again Chief paused to build suspense. To play my role, I asked, "Then what happened?"

"Well," Chief said, "Me and Ivan and Little Joe packed that sharpshooter of a drunk cook out to the big round trough in the horse lot and bedded him right easy in the water and moss. 'Jim Scout' brung the cook's bedroll and put it on his belly. The cook moaned as we propped his head against the rim of the trough."

Before we separated, Chief said, "the way me and Ivan knew to bring him to shore was when the tadpoles started rising to the surface gasping for air. We weren't as worried about that sapsucker of a cook as much as we were of suffocating all those tadpoles."

No records exist on how many days we worked before the spring work started for real. Draws flooding from Barnhart cut the ranch in half. Hard rains kept us wet for over a month. Ivan's padded saddle, the first he ever rode, soaked up the first three inches. Chief kept us laughing, clucking to an old pony to get him to go down one more slick trail. He'd say, "Puddle on along, Rusty. You jist stumble on flat ground. You're sure-footed as a preacher on these mud banks."

Chances are fair Ivan and Chief made Angelo without too long a string of bad luck. Hard not to yearn for one more spring working with a couple of cowboys who furnished the entertainment wherever they worked ...